

# THE FIRST DINNER - Drawn by James Montgomery Flagg



JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

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## FAMILIAR INCIDENTS

By Stephen Leacock

**My Lost Opportunities.**

THE other day I took a walk with a real estate man. Out in the suburbs he leaned over the wooden fence of an empty lot and waved his hand at it.

"There's a lot," he said, "that we sold last week for half a million dollars."

"Did you really?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said, "and do you know that twenty-five years ago you could have picked that up for fifty thousand?"

"What," I said, "do you mean to say that I could have had all that beautiful grass and those mullen stalks for fifty thousand dollars?"

"I do."

"You mean that when I was a student at college, feeding on four dollars a week, this opportunity was knocking at the door and I missed it?"

I turned my head away in bitterness as I thought of my own folly. Why had I never happened to walk out this way with fifty thousand dollars in my pocket and buy all this beautiful mud?

The real estate man smiled complacently at my grief.

"I can show you more than that," he said. "Do you see that big stretch of empty ground out there past that last fence?"

"Yes, yes," I said excitedly, "the land with the beautiful tar paper shack and the withered cedar tree—the one withered cedar tree standing in its lonely isolation and seeming to beckon—"

"Say," he said, "was you ever in the real estate business yourself?"

"No," I answered, "but I have a poetic mind, and I begin to see the poetry, the majesty, of real estate."

"Oh, is that it?" he answered. "Well, that land out there—it's an acre and a half—was sold yesterday for three million dollars!"

"For what?"

"For three million dollars, cold."

"Not cold!" I said, "don't tell me it was cold."

"Yes," went on the real estate man, "and only three years ago you could have come out here and had it for a song!"

"For a song!" I repeated.

Just think of it! And I had missed it! With a voice like mine. If I had known what I know now I would have come out to that land and sung to it all night. I never knew in the days when I was content with fifteen dollars a week what a hidden gift my voice was. I should have taken up and singing and made a fortune out of it.

The thought of it saddened me all the way home; and the talk of the real estate man as he went made me feel still worse.

He showed me a church that I could have bought for a hundred thousand and sold now at half a million for a motor garage. If I had started buying churches instead of working on a newspaper I'd have been rich to-day.

There was a skating rink I could



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have bought, and a theatre and a fruit store, a beautiful little one story wooden fruit store, right on a corner with the darlingest Italian in it that you ever saw. There was the cutest little pet of a cow stable that I could have turned into an apartment store at a profit of a million—at the time when I was studying Greek and forgetting it. Oh! the wasted opportunities of life!

And that evening when I got back to the club and talked about it at dinner to my business friends, I found

way, they said, was thrown on the market for fifty millions. I left it there writhing, and didn't pick it up. Sheer lack of confidence! I see now why these men get rich. It's their fine, glorious confidence that enables them to write out a check for \$50,000,000 and think nothing of it.

If I wrote a check like that I'd be afraid of going to Sing Sing. But they aren't, and so they get what they deserve.

Forty-five years ago—a man at the club told me this with almost a sob in his voice—either Rockefeller or Carnegie could have been bought clean up for a thousand dollars!

Think of it!

Why didn't my father buy them for me, as pets, for my birthday and let me keep them till I grew up?

If I had my life over again, no school or education for me! Not with all this beautiful mud and these tar paper shacks and corner lot fruit stores lying around! I'd buy out the whole United States and take a chance a sporting chance, on the rise in values.

### Under the Barber's Knife.

"Was you to the Arena the other night?" said the barber, leaning over me and speaking in his confidential whisper.

"Yes," I said, "I was there."

He saw from this that I could still speak. So he laid another thick wet towel over my face before he spoke again.

"What did you think of the game?" he asked.

But he had miscalculated. I could still make a faint sound through the wet towels. He laid three or four more very thick ones over my face and stood with his five finger tips pressed against my face for support. A thick steam arose about me. Through it I could hear the barber's voice and the flick-flack of the razor as he stropped it.

"Yes, sir," he went on in his quiet professional tone, punctuated with the noise of the razor, "I knowed from the start them boys was sure to win"—flick-flack-flick-flack—"as soon as I seen the ice that night and seen the getaway them boys made I knowed it"—flick-flack—"and just as soon as Jimmy got ahold of the puck—"

This was more than the barber at the next chair could stand.

"Him get de puck," he cried, giving an angry dash with a full brush of soap into the face of the man under him—"him get ut—dat stuff—why, boys," he said, and he turned appealingly to the eight barbers, who all rested their elbows on the customers' faces while they listened to the rising altercation; even the manicure girl, thrilled to attention, clasped tight the lumpy hand of her client in her white digits and remained motionless—"why boys, dat feller can't no more play hockey than—"

"See here," said the barber, suddenly and angrily, striking his fist

emphatically on the towels that covered my face. "I'll bet you \$5 to \$1 Jimmy can skate rings round any two men in the league."

"Him skate," sneered the other, squirting a jet of blinding steam in the face of the client he was treating, "he ain't got no more go in him than dat rag"—and he slapped a wet towel across his client's face.

All the barbers were excited now. There was a babel of talk from behind each of the eight chairs. "He can't skate"; "He can skate"; "I'll bet you ten."

Already they were losing their tempers, slapping their customers

with wet towels and jabbing great brushfuls of soap into their mouths. My barber was leaning over my face with his whole body. In another minute one of the other of them would have been sufficiently provoked to have dealt his customer a blow behind the ear.

Then suddenly there was a hush.

"The boss," said one.

In another minute I could realize, though I couldn't see it, that a majestic figure in a white coat was moving down the line. All was still again except the quiet hum of the mechanical shampoo brush and the soft burble of running water.

The barber began removing the wet towels from my face one by one. He peeled them off with the professional neatness of an Egyptologist unwrapping a mummy. When he reached my face he looked searchingly at it. There was suspicion in his eye.

"Been out of town?" he questioned.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Who's been doing your work?" he asked. This question, from a barber, has no reference to one's daily occupation. It means "who has been shaving you?"

I knew it was best to own up. I'd been in the wrong, and I meant to acknowledge it with perfect frankness.

"I've been shaving myself," I said.

My barber stood back from me in contempt. There was a distinct sensation all down the line of barbers. One of them threw a wet rag in a corner with a thud, and another sent a sudden squirt from an atomizer into his customer's eyes as a mark of disgust.

My barber continued to look at me narrowly.

"What razor do you use?" he said.

"A safety razor," I answered.

The barber had begun to dash soap over my face; but he stopped, aghast at what I had said.

A safety razor to a barber is like a red rag to a bull.

"If it was me," he went on, beating lather into me as he spoke, "I wouldn't let one of them things near my face. No, sir. There ain't no safety in them. They tear the hide clean off you—just rake the hair right out by the follicles," as he said this he was illustrating his meaning with jabs of his razor—"them things just cut a man's face all to pieces," he jabbed a stick of alum against an open cut that he had made—"And as for cleanliness, for sanitation, for this here hygiene and for germs I wouldn't have them round me for a fortune."

I said nothing. I knew I had deserved it and I kept quiet.

"Massage?" he said.

"No, thanks."

"Shampoo the scalp?" he whispered.

"No, thanks."

"Sing the hair?" he coaxed.

"No, thanks."

The barber made one more effort.

"Say," he said in my ear, as a thing concerning himself and me alone, "your hair's pretty well all falling out. You'd better let me just shampoo up the scalp a bit and stop up them follicles or pretty soon you won't—"

"No, thank you," I said, "not to-day."

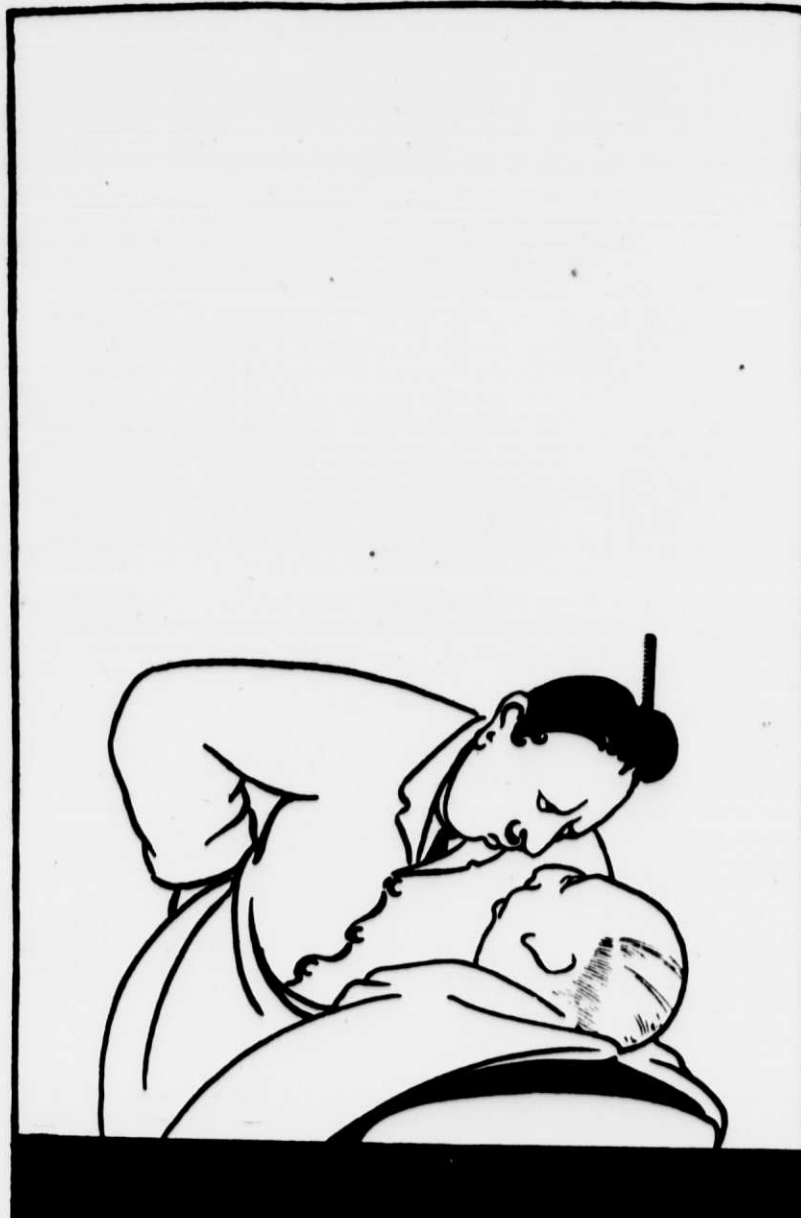
This was all the barber could stand.

In a second he had me thrown out of the chair.

"Next!" he shouted.

As I passed down the line of the barbers I could see contempt in every eye while they turned on the full clatter of their revolving shampoo brushes and drowned the noise of my miserable exit in the roar of machinery.

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